

Populists or Proletarians? Laclau, Žižek, and the Problem of Articulation

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Proletarian. adj. Mean; wretched; vile; vulgar.

Samuel Johnson,
Dictionary of the English Language, 1755

What began as a friendly enough exchange of views between Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek¹ has recently become a full-fledged and intense confrontation. In the conclusion to his most recent book, Laclau reserves a section for Žižek in which he accuses the latter of nothing less than political nihilism.² For his part, in a recent high-profile lecture at Birkbeck College, Žižek made this new book by Laclau his primary target, and delivered a number of criticisms including the claim that populism as Laclau describes it is merely the ideological twin of contemporary administrative “post-politics,” i.e. is nothing innovative at all.³

There is more to this exchange than academically parsed invective and argumentative moving targets. The core topic around which Laclau and Žižek are engaged is easily the most crucial one for any radical or leftist doing political theory today: where can we look for a revolutionary political subjectivity? It is my contention that while Laclau’s populist post-Marxism is a persuasively constructed alternative to the deadlocks of classical Marxist orthodoxy, it is premised on an inadequate reading of Marx that leaves Laclau vulnerable on precisely the points that Žižek pursues.

My task, therefore, is to explain Marx’s theory of the formation and activation of class struggle with reference to the dispute between Laclau and Žižek. First, I will identify some of the texts essential to an understanding of what Marx meant by the term “proletariat.” Although there are good reasons for doubting that Marx himself had a fully developed political referent in mind to which his term could apply, he nevertheless provides some suggestive and incontrovertible parameters for the constitution of any future anti-capitalist subjectivity. Next, it will be necessary to summarize briefly the current positions of Laclau and Žižek on the question of revolutionary subjectivity. Laclau affirms two crucial theses. First, that there is an illegitimate logical leap within Marx and Marxism regarding the possibility of antagonism resulting from contradictions between developments in the means of production and social relations of production; for Laclau this problem conclusively undercuts the priority given traditionally by

¹ Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (New York: Verso, 2000).

² Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (New York: Verso, 2005), pp. 232-239.

³ Slavoj Žižek, “Against the Populist Temptation,” Birkbeck College, November 26, 2005. Available in audio format at <http://www.adamkotsko.com/weblog/Zizek.mp3> (accessed December 7, 2005).

Marxists to the economic realm as the primary site of revolutionary struggle. Second, populist movements are affirmed as politically neutral in themselves but nevertheless as the only social agents empirically and logically capable of forcing changes in oppressive societies. By applying Marx's analysis of the proletariat, I will identify some key limitations of Laclau's theory; I will conclude by noting the corresponding criticisms that Žižek offers and note those features of his position that suggest an alternative to both liberal-democratic capitalism and Laclau's reformist populism.

I

A survey of Marx's statements about the proletariat requires that we maintain two theses about its constitution, which in turn entail two corollaries regarding its activity.

First thesis. The proletariat is not the working class.

From the term's first appearance in Marx's early work to its conspicuous scarcity in the text of *Capital* and its historical instantiations in the later writings, the proletariat is defined as *the* revolutionary agent *tout court*. In the introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, we read: "the proletariat is not formed by *natural* poverty but by *artificially produced* poverty; it is formed not from the mass of people mechanically oppressed by the weight of society but from the mass of people issuing from society's *acute disintegration*."⁴ It is comprised of neither the most egregiously exploited workers of a given productive sector of a society (industrial, agricultural, etc.), nor of the collection of exploited workers engaged together (during, for example, a general strike), nor of any other aggregate of workers as such: since "the wrong it suffers is not a *particular wrong* but *wrong in general*; [it is] a sphere of society which can no longer lay claim to a *historical* title, but merely to a *human* one."⁵ There has been a tendency within orthodox Marxism to restrict the proletariat to the class of workers, of persons who sell their labor power, and this tendency must be reassessed.⁶

In the first place, the propensity of capital to create a reserve army of unemployed labor (in order to drive down wages)⁷ ensures that there will always be some segment of the population who feel the brunt of "wrong in general," of "artificially produced poverty," yet are not identifiable as workers; many of these will inevitably give up on ever finding work, and will not be identifiable even as would-be workers. Yet it is precisely this kind of intense social disintegration that Marx says is constitutive of proletarian subjectivity. Additionally, the nature

⁴ Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, tr. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (New York: Vintage, 1975), p. 256. Emphasis in original.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Goetz A. Briefs, *The Proletariat: A Challenge to Western Civilization* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1937), in all likelihood the first monograph on the topic in English, is indicative of the problem. Although by no means a radical, Briefs does contend that the existence of the proletariat poses a significant challenge to Western institutions. More importantly: he feels entirely justified in providing a sociological classification of existing "proletariats" (there are four): 1. Those of advanced countries like England, Germany, and Switzerland. 2. The wage earners of North America. 3. Agriculturally/industrially mixed countries like France, Italy, and Sweden. 4. Recently opened countries: India and China. (167-171) His conflation of the proletariat with employed workers as such is entirely innocent and minimally polemical.

⁷ Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One*, tr. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage, 1977), pp. 781-794.

of formal subsumption under capital⁸ is such that all aspects of social activity will, in time, become subject to capitalist management: since any productive form of activity is potential for capitalist appropriation (including intellectual labor, aesthetic production, and private care-giving),⁹ it is not helpful to define the proletariat as comprised of workers, since – at least in all but the least advanced capitalist countries – to the extent that formal subsumption has extended across society nearly all persons will be workers of some sort anyway. It might be debatable whether the attribute “worker” is a necessary condition for proletarian identity, but we know that it is not a sufficient one. This is why *Capital* can concern itself almost exclusively with capitalists and workers and *simultaneously* suggest the possibilities and causes of revolutionary crisis: Marx recognizes that nineteenth century empirical conditions are not essential to his logic, and can therefore speak of moments where workers constitute the proletariat without privileging workers as such. Finally, the most important reason why an understanding of the proletariat must begin by negative definition is that the exclusion of “worker” as a sufficient category testifies to the inherently political nature of Marx’s project: it is the essence of the liberal imaginary to separate the mechanisms of political engagement from the realm of social and economic production, and this is why *Capital* could only proceed as a critique of *political* economy. The rarity of references to the proletariat in the text of *Capital* (volume 1) itself leads us indirectly to the second thesis.

Second thesis. The proletariat is an instantiation that is both particular and universal.

According to Etienne Balibar, who has examined the relevant bibliographic details, of a mere twenty or so references to proletarians/the proletariat in the first (1867) edition of *Capital*, only one of those involves a direct confrontation with “the capitalist,” and the second edition (1872) adds only two references.¹⁰ The content of these references will become relevant later, but for now it is significant to note their number: if the used and abused workers who appear on each of the thousand pages were meant to be identified straightforwardly with “the proletariat,” surely wouldn’t Marx have opted for the term more often?¹¹ That the proletariat may be constituted by something more than just the conditions of economic exploitation requires us to move from a negative to a positive determination.

If a metaphor may be permitted: the proletariat is a particular cut in the social flesh that makes possible both a universal wound and that wound’s healing. For Marx, the universal class is a class that from its emergence does not have a recognized place within civil society, that class which is, in a word, the *total loss* of humanity and which can therefore redeem itself only through the *total redemption of humanity*. This dissolution of society as a particular class is the *proletariat*.¹²

⁸ Ibid., pp. 1019-1023.

⁹ On intellectual, immaterial, etc. labor see Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, tr. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Vintage, 1973), pp. 705-706. For a contemporary discussion of the extent of formal subsumption (useful quite independently of the authors’ theoretical position), see Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2000), chapter 3.4.

¹⁰ Etienne Balibar, “In Search of the Proletariat: The Notion of Class Politics in Marx,” in *Masses, Classes, Ideas: Studies on Politics and Philosophy Before and After Marx*, tr. James Swenson (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 126-127.

¹¹ As Balibar says, *Capital* is “the result of twenty years of work and line-by-line corrections, and the text in which Marx wanted to concentrate his theory most systematically. In general, *Capital* does not deal with the ‘proletariat,’ but with the ‘working class’ (*Arbeiterklasse*).” Ibid., p. 126.

¹² *Early Writings*, p. 256.

Although the qualifiers “universal” and “particular” have decidedly Hegelian connotations, Avineri argues that any straightforward Hegelian quality is dramatically limited here.¹³ It is far more likely that the case of the proletariat as universal class is an instance of Marx’s inversion, of discovering “the rational kernel within the mystical shell.”¹⁴ This rational kernel in fact seems to occupy *three* places or roles in its activity. First, it has no place, it is nothing at all: as we have seen, it is “not a class of civil society,” is the “total loss of humanity,” and claims: “*I am nothing and I should be everything*.”¹⁵ Second, it is this everything, the universal: “this class fraternizes and fuses with society in general, becomes identified with it and is experienced and acknowledged as its *universal representative*; a moment in which its claims and rights are truly the rights and claims of society itself.”¹⁶ We should recall also the universally expansive tendencies of capitalist processes of subsumption: formal subsumption colonizes every preexisting practice and domain of human activity, and real subsumption transforms those regions and practices into maximally effective producers of surplus value. As the explosive consequent of capitalist expansion, the proletariat raises “material force to the level of political power”¹⁷ and must, in making itself adequate to its enemy, become universal.¹⁸ Finally, the proletariat is particular without being specific: although Marx refuses to ordain any specific class as having proletarian tendencies or attributes, it is nevertheless through the making-generic of the particular interests of a class that universal claims are prosecuted.

Two texts suggest how the universalization of particular positions can take place. First, in narrating the failure of the revolution in France of 1848, Marx places the blame squarely at the feet of the proletariat: instead of “revolutionizing the old world by means of the latter’s own great, combined resources, [it] seeks, rather, to achieve its own salvation behind society’s back, in private fashion, within its limited conditions of existence.”¹⁹ The first act of universalization is therefore an absolute self-negation, an abandonment of any contingent and specific interests: the 1848 proletariat failed insofar as it did not make this self-abandonment. The second act of universalization is the beginning of attacks on the capitalist order as such: this includes symbolic reversals, the forcing of legal contradictions, and physical violence. In part 8 of *Capital*, on “So-Called Primitive Accumulation,” Marx says that the myth of some ancient, originary appropriation that is the innocent basis of inequality under capitalism “plays approximately the same role in political economy as original sin does in theology,” namely it obscures the aggressive political activity that initiates and constantly sustains all social inequality.²⁰ It is in this politically charged discussion that the proletariat makes a rare textual appearance, one of the 1872 additions that Balibar notes. In his account of the imposition of laws in England against strikes and the creation of trade unions, Marx comments: “the barbarous laws against combinations of workers collapsed in 1825 in the face of the threatening attitude of the

¹³ “If Hegel’s ‘universal class’ hypostatizes a given historical phenomenon into a self-fulfilling trans-historical norm, Marx uses it differently. For Marx the term will always be open to the dialectical dynamics of the historical process.” Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp. 57-58.

¹⁴ *Capital*, p. 103.

¹⁵ *Early Writings*, p. 254.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ “[T]he universalistic nature of the proletariat is a corollary of the conditions of production in a capitalist society.” Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Marx*, p. 61.

¹⁹ Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), p. 24.

²⁰ *Capital*, p. 873.

proletariat.”²¹ Marx uses “proletariat” here because it is not just the victory against unfair laws that is being noted, but also an instance of the forceful clarification of the intimate link between economic reality and political procedure in the face of liberal obfuscation.²² In its practical reversal of capitalist ideology – economy and politics are not separate, or even occasionally linked, but often one and the same thing – the proletariat in this example strikes a blow for all of society.

First corollary. The proletariat is not a member of the sociopolitical order of any society in which it acts. It cannot become a member without thereby dissolving itself.

If the preceding claims are correct – that the proletariat is the sufferer of universal wrong or exclusion and that it is also a particular sociopolitical agent – then any idealist recuperations are precluded and it follows that any given proletariat will not have a place within the political order of its society. I suggested above that we could understand the suggestive political features of *Capital* as instances of workers constituting the proletariat, without thereby privileging the category “worker.” In that case, several features sustain the workers’ (as proletariat) continued exclusion from the sociopolitical order. First, the worker is the site of the expression of a number of conflicting forces: the downward pressure keeping wages as close as possible to subsistence level, the upward pressure on surplus-value creation and extraction, the lateral fluctuation of prices and consumption relative to the first two forces, the psychical and physical demands imposed by real subsumption (subordination to machines and techniques in Fordism, Taylorism, etc.) versus the insistence on real personal freedom proclaimed by liberal ideology, and so on. Second, “the condition of the working class perpetuates the violence which at first openly and ‘politically’ characterized the transition from feudalism to capitalism.”²³ The continual reenactment – on the ideologically abstracted “purely economic” stage – of the political violence inherent in capitalism means that any instance in which the proletariat accommodated itself to the social order sufficient to receive recognition would also mark the moment of the proletariat’s failure, of its fall from universality and its dissolution into *petit bourgeois* servitude.

Second corollary. The proletariat acts in order to overthrow the capitalist social order, including its economic, political, intellectual, and cultural aspects.

If the proletariat does not belong to the social order in which it emerges, and membership is not an option for it, then its only possible courses of action are the abolition of the social order, or self-destruction. As it turns out, for Marx these two courses are one and the same: in its attacks on the capitalist order, the proletariat “is only declaring the secret of its own existence, for it *is* the *actual* dissolution of that order.”²⁴ Dissolute society, constituted as a universal class, need only exist for as long as the order that it seeks to overthrow.

It is interesting to note that Marx himself never felt comfortable with the question of state power, or with the possibility of identifying a proletarian emergence before the fact. Balibar

²¹ Ibid., p. 903.

²² Balibar, “In Search of the Proletariat,” p. 129.

²³ Ibid., p. 127.

²⁴ *Early Writings*, p. 256.

finds two parallel lines of ambiguity that express a fundamental tension within Marxism.²⁵ On the theoretical side, there is the issue – forever forced to the surface by Lenin – of where to place the boundary between the catastrophic adoption of the state forms produced under capital and the revolutionary reversal of state power against capital's interests. Practically, Marx's own lackluster political performance requires explanation: in the process of distinguishing their position from those of rival leftist thinkers, Marx and Engels produced everything but precisely those texts that would have bolstered their working-class acceptance.²⁶ The tactic of triangulating his position by playing his opponents off against one another only left Marx with a position that at times looks inconsistent.

If, as Balibar claims, the problem was a situation in which available leftist theory (workerist/trade unionist proposals; anarchism; syndicalism; romantic utopianism) ultimately filled the available conceptual space, leaving no room for Marx, I suggest that this is *always* the problem with Marx: because only Marx dares to posit the achievement of a concrete universality which is retroactively justified not just historically, *but also logically*; such a position will, quite by definition, be excluded from any regime of accepted opinion, since it demands practical action on the basis of epistemic claims that stretch far beyond what any modal logic can bear. Here the tension between the universal and particular reaches its crisis and its clinamen, in what I'll call the problem of articulation: in the process of establishing every historical and practical instantiation that opposes itself to capital, an inadequacy always appears such that universality seems to be one step further removed from what has been achieved.

II

The best way to make sense of the debate between Laclau and Žižek is as a conflict over the meaning of this problem of articulation: if some efficacious revolutionary or antagonistic subjectivity is possible, how will it constitute and assert itself in relation to the existing capitalist social order? And especially: how can such a subjectivity assert itself without, on the one hand, falling prey to the capacity of parliamentary-capitalist ideology to co-opt universal claims and, on the other hand, resist the particularist temptation whereby it would abandon universality in order to achieve specific concrete (reformist) gains? Before explaining their respective positions, it might be helpful to note the points on which Laclau and Žižek actually agree; this will not take long.

First, both authors concede that there is no presently articulable material or conceptual space outside the borders of modern 'democratic' capitalist society.²⁷ Second, they each affirm this political situation as expressive of a more fundamental ontological situation in which the exception to the given global order is not some positive content as such, but the experience of a

²⁵ Balibar, "In Search of the Proletariat," p. 132-133.

²⁶ "[O]ne does not wonder enough about the fact that such indefatigable polemicists such as Marx and his faithful assistant Engels turned out to be incapable of writing an 'Anti-Lassalle' or an 'Anti-Bakunin,' which would have been practically much more important than an *Anti-Dühring* or even than the reissue of an *Anti-Proudhon*. No personal and no tactical reason in the world will ever be able to explain such a lapse, a lapse which moreover was, as we know, heavy with political consequences. *They did not write it because they could not write it.*" Ibid., p. 134.

²⁷ "In my perspective, there is no beyond the play of differences, no ground which would a priori privilege some elements of the whole over others. Whatever centrality an element acquires, it has to be explained by the play of differences as such." Laclau, *Populist Reason*, p. 69. "[T]oday, one cannot even imagine a viable alternative to global capitalism – the only option for the Left is ... palliative measures." Žižek, "Holding the Place," *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, p. 321.

constitutive lack, a gap in that order.²⁸ Finally, they agree on the fundamental point that the relationship between particularity and universality basically operates according to what one might call “open Hegelianism”: leaving aside the academic question of whether Hegel *really* meant for Absolute Knowledge (or any other moment) to mark some kind of halting point of the dialectic, Laclau and Žižek know that every successful instance of emancipatory politics is marred by some incompleteness or even perversion that, instead of earning it the mantle of utopian achievement, renders that political articulation conclusively flawed by some still-unrealized distant universal. In other words: it is not simply the capitalist or neoliberal order that is marked by an essential lack, but rather, there is a lack in every order.²⁹ Taken together, these points of convergence enable them to agree that what I’m calling the problem of articulation is a problem: if there is no apparent outside to the universality in which we currently operate, and every attempt so far at asserting a particular position which would achieve this universality always produces some unforeseen problem or remainder – what does this mean for political subjectivity, and what are we to do about it?

Laclau’s answer to the problem of articulation, characterized by an emphasis on discursive constructions, Gramscian hegemony, and “radical democracy,” can be reduced to two essential moves. First, he has worked extensively to show that the classical Marxist privileging of class struggle is premised on an illegitimate logical leap with Marx’s work itself, and that the result of his disentangling of antagonism from economic considerations puts the multiplicity of hegemonic struggles on equal footing.³⁰ Laclau juxtaposes the claim from the *Manifesto* that “The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle,” and the features of Marxism that in general rely on a theory of antagonism within the relations of production, and a passage from the preface to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* in which Marx describes the transformation of society as taking place because of contradictions between the development of material productive forces and the relations of production – where the latter tensions do not require anything like (political) antagonism in order to emerge.³¹ It is because of these inherent contradictions on the economic level, for example, that Marx can narrate *Capital* with only minimal recourse (as we have seen) to the proletariat. For Laclau, the logical coherence of Marxism requires either the reintegration of antagonism within a theory of historical change – he considers several possible ways of accomplishing this, but finds them all lacking – or the abandonment of the historical basis of the theory. Since antagonism cannot be integrated,

²⁸ “[T]he ‘preponderance of the objective,’ that which eludes our grasp in the Thing, is no longer the excess of its positive content over our cognitive capacities but, on the contrary, its *lack*, that is, the traces of *failures*, the *absences* inscribed in its positive existence.” Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (New York: Verso, 1999), p. 89. “This means that the universal is part of my identity as far as I am penetrated by a constitutive lack, that is as far as my differential identity has failed in its process of constitution. The universal emerges out of the particular not as some principle underlying and explaining the particular, but as an incomplete horizon suturing a dislocated particular identity.” Laclau, “Universalism, Particularism, and the Question of Identity,” *Emancipation(s)* (New York: Verso, 1996), p. 28.

²⁹ *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 89. *Emancipation(s)*, p. 28.

³⁰ Although the text most often cited is Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (New York: Verso, 1985), I take up instead the argument given in Laclau, *New Reflections on The Revolution of Our Time* (New York: Verso, 1990), which, by Laclau’s own admission (p. 4) deals directly with the logical and philosophical categories of Marxism – as opposed to the more positivistic and historical argument in the first book.

³¹ *New Reflections*, pp. 5-6.

it establishes the conditions for a permanent 'outside.' But if, in this case, history is faced with a permanent outside, the outcome of its different moments depends on contingent power relations between forces that cannot be reduced to any kind of unified logic.³²

From here it is only a short step to Gramsci and a theory of hegemony. If every struggle whatsoever – insofar as it depends only on “contingent power relations” – is in principle put on equal hegemonic footing with all the others (and the influence of Carl Schmitt here entails that reactionary and fascist struggles are included in the mix) then hegemonic struggle obviously can no longer be assumed to be of a class nature, or aimed at anti-capitalist goals. Since hegemonic struggle is no longer operative within the “purely economic” sphere, the target of antagonist universality must be restated, and this is Laclau’s second move: the enemy of emancipatory struggle is now closure or completion as such.

To appreciate this last point, we should consider the typology Laclau gives of the major historical forms of thinking the particular/universal relation.³³ First, the classical, ancient philosophers asserted that the universal and particular were simply and permanently divided, and that the universal side is permeable to reason. Second, the emergence of Christianity marked a partial loss of universality, insofar as the universal only became accessible eschatologically through revelation. The line of division also shifts: from a split within the thing to a split within time, where time is composed of finite and eschatological (infinite) events. Laclau claims that “the modern idea of a ‘universal class’ and the various forms of Eurocentrism are nothing but the distant historical effects of the logic of incarnation.”³⁴ The third moment, which achieved its pinnacle in Hegel and Marx, was the replacement of incarnation with reason: the self-development of reason includes an act of canceling irrationality itself, and the proletariat is no longer a simple host for the universal incarnating force, but a body in which the dividing line between the universal and particular is itself cancelled. On the way to his position (a fourth moment), Laclau considers a paradox within differential particularity: a shared context is required to assert one’s differential particularity, such that “any victory against the system also destabilizes the identity of the victorious force.”³⁵ Particularity cannot become universal without destroying its own basis for identity. This, then, is his position:

[T]he universal is a symbol of a missing fullness and the particular exists only in the contradictory movement of asserting at the same time a differential identity and canceling it through its subsumption in the non-differential medium.³⁶

The most significant consequence of this position is that antagonisms can no longer be prosecuted by assertions of dialectical negativity, by violent reversals of position, since this would only reinscribe both the victim and oppressor within the same general form; instead, oppressive systems can be combated only by “negating in that system its universal dimension: the principle of closure as such.”³⁷

It is because closure, completion, or the arrival of a universal fullness is now the target that populism becomes an attractive option for Laclau – in fact the *only* available option: the traditional dismissal of populist movements by liberals and well-meaning leftists is tantamount to

³² Ibid., p. 10.

³³ *Emancipation(s)*, pp. 22-29.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 23.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 27.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 28.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 33.

“the dismissal of politics *tout court*.”³⁸ Populism is the name not for any identifiable empirical phenomenon, but for a social logic that expresses precisely those elements of antagonism that Marxist dialectical history was unable to incorporate: in fact populism is “the royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution of the political as such.”³⁹ Laclau’s book is a proficient mix of historical discussion, tropological analysis, and philosophical argument, but the specifics of his populist logic, insofar as they depend on his unchanged philosophical position, do not require detailed explanation here.

What *is* of particular interest, though, is the section in chapter 5 in which Laclau restates his objections to Marx and claims for populist movements the achievements Marx promised of the proletariat. Laclau reasserts that the validity of the Marxist account is dependent on its ability to account for and reabsorb political antagonism (which Laclau now calls “social heterogeneity,” the “outside”); on this occasion he narrates the failure of Marx via an historical survey of the emergence of the terms “proletariat” and “*lumpenproletariat*.” The bulk of Laclau’s argument here rests on the claim that, in order to identify the proletariat as a revolutionary historical force, Marx had to find an other from which to differentiate it, and so had to posit the *lumpenproletariat* as an absolutely excluded, wretched, heterogeneous “outsider.”⁴⁰ As we have already seen, for Laclau the existence of any heterogeneous social element makes the outcome of historical contradictions radically contingent and dependent on hegemony – on exclusively political articulation, or the logic of populism.

So Laclau’s answer to the problem of the articulation of the particular universal is, first, to reject the finality and closure of Hegelian/Marxian reconciliation, and second, to valorize populist movements as “partial objects that, through their very partiality embody an ever-receding totality. The latter requires a contingent social construction, as it does not result from the positive, ontic nature of the objects themselves. This is what we have called *articulation* and *hegemony*.”⁴¹

III

In the remainder of this paper, I will suggest some problems with Laclau’s position given the analysis of Marx’s proletariat provided earlier. These problems lead us then to the objections Žižek raises, and I will conclude by evaluating Žižek’s position against Laclau’s responses to him.

For Laclau, the “masterly move of Marx” consisted in positing that “the working class would be the agent of a new stage in the development of productive forces, and the term ‘proletariat’ was used to designate this new agent.”⁴² But Laclau’s compliment is a trick; such a positing would have been no masterly move – any number of socialists and trade unionists were courting industrial labor in Marx’s day. More importantly, as we have already noted in thesis one, above, that the working class is not equivalent to the proletariat. Laclau’s account, moreover, is anachronistic: Marx’s most sustained theoretical description of the proletariat (in the *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* [1843-4]) significantly predates the analysis, in *Capital* (1867), that led him to deduce future contradictions in the development of productive forces. Additionally, Laclau offers no textual basis for establishing the equivalence of the

³⁸ *On Populist Reason*, p. x.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 142-144.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 143.

working class and proletariat. The handful of examples he provides of the exclusion of the *lumpenproletariat* in fact only speak to Marx's personal disregard for their character, and it is significant that in some examples they are described as employed – hence identical in all but title to regular workers.⁴³ In truth, the description Marx gives in 1843-4 of the proletariat corresponds almost exactly to the group Laclau defines as heterogeneous to the social structure. Note, however, that this only calls into question the later etymological and historical critique of Marx in *On Populist Reason* and not the argument in *New Reflections*.

To refute that position, we must consider the details of my second thesis. I argued above that the first feature of the becoming-universal of the proletariat was its self-negation, the suspension of its own specific interests. Marx speaks of the proletariat becoming identified with society as such, and on its face this seems consonant with Laclau's populist approach. But note that Laclau's popular movements work in exactly the *opposite* direction of the Marxian proletariat: where Marx describes the 1848 proletariat as an utter failure insofar as it maintained its own interests,⁴⁴ Laclau describes in detail the process by which particular demands are connected to each other and then achieve hegemonic status by co-opting already valorized but semantically indeterminate "floating signifiers" (like "democracy," "freedom," etc.).⁴⁵ So rather than the self-negating (for the sake of the universal) function required by Marx, Laclau's populist movements pursue a course of insistent self-assertion. How then does this refute the logical argument of *New Reflections*, that historical contingency entails hegemonic articulations? In the first place, we should accept Laclau's point that any claims regarding historical necessity must be abandoned. But the fact that class antagonism is not the inevitable result of contradictions in the relations of production does not mean that antagonisms as such are in principle equal: proletarian subjectivity may be "outside" the recognized social order without being outside the interplay of structural forces – and the self-negating requirement of concrete universality testifies to the fact that some particularities may be inherently more transformative than others. Moreover, it does not follow that a contingent or deferred universal must be an empty one. The economy, while not "determining in the final instance," may nevertheless exert a foundational influence on all the other contemporary sites of struggle.

This is in fact one of Žižek's most important arguments, both as a criticism of Laclau and as a feature of his own position. While the economic realm is neither the ultimate culprit of nor the final panacea for every social ill, it does determine the horizon of possibility for all other sociopolitical antagonisms:

[Laclau's] 'generalization of the hegemonic form of politics' is itself dependent on a certain socioeconomic process: it is contemporary global capitalism, with its dynamics of 'deterritorialization,' which has created the conditions for the demise of 'essentialist' politics and the proliferation of new multiple political subjectivities. So, again, to make myself clear: my point is *not* that the economy (the logic of Capital) is a kind of 'essential anchor' that somehow 'limits' hegemonic struggle – on the contrary, it is its *positive condition*; it creates the very background against which 'generalized hegemony' can thrive.⁴⁶

Žižek characterizes contemporary capitalism as a kind of "global machine" that enables discourses otherwise immobilized by social convention – religious fanaticisms, nationalist mythologies, or egoistic hedonism, for example – to rearticulate themselves according to its logic

⁴³ Ibid., p. 144.

⁴⁴ Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, p. 24.

⁴⁵ *On Populist Reason*, chapters. 4-6.

⁴⁶ Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, p. 319.

and thereby gain access to the various sites of hegemonic struggle.⁴⁷ This is why his argument against Laclau is so damaging: it is not just (as he said rather timidly during the Birkbeck lecture) that the logic of populist movements is inherently politically neutral. Laclau himself admits as much. It is rather that insofar as global capitalism is the part of the chain of struggles that sustains the horizon of struggle itself, it will always influence the shape of particular emergent hegemonic demands. In other words: it is not just that feminist, antiracist, LGBT, environmentalist, etc. struggles historically don't rise to the level of challenging the capitalist order as such, it's that they *can't*: when these demands aren't squeezed out by an exponentially larger sea of reactionary populisms (today: anti-evolutionists, religious fundamentalists of every stripe, the nascent return of European nationalisms), capitalist political economy ensures that progressive demands only acquire substantial hegemony when they are articulated in a way that isn't threatening to capital. Oil executives are very excited to develop and sell hybrid cars; fashion-conscious gay men are a retailer's dream customers. When Žižek says that capitalism does not function as a limiting "anchor" on hegemonic struggle, what he means is that capitalism does not define some particular site into which hegemony cannot penetrate: in this respect, formal and real subsumption under capital are the economic analogues of the processes by which capital enables the total politicization of life under generalized hegemony. But the essential difference with Laclau is that, as the horizontal determinant – the one feature on which generalized hegemonic struggle depends – capital is thereby the one element that progressive hegemonic struggles will be unable to attack.⁴⁸

Laclau implicitly recognizes this, and juxtaposing his claims against the corollaries of proletarian subjectivity stated above will bear this out. First, whereas for Marx the proletariat does not and cannot have a place within the established sociopolitical order, for Laclau the assertion of such a recognized "place at the table" is the necessary condition of politics as such: it is only by connecting its chain of demands to a preexisting "floating signifier" that a given struggle can get a widespread public hearing. Žižek draws the implication that Laclau is therefore collapsing revolutionary antagonisms into mere struggles for recognition.⁴⁹ In his recent responses, Laclau objects that his understanding of equivalence – the logical feature of populist subjectivity that aggregates diverse series of demands into a united political chain – ensures that populisms will always demand substantive transformation rather than simply procedural accommodation.⁵⁰ But to the extent that Laclau makes demands – concrete relational expressions – the most basic unit of his analysis,⁵¹ he places a kind of permanent burden of proof on the populist movement to forever demonstrate that it is not simply seeking recognition. In contrast, the Marxist proletariat is constituted precisely in the moment that specific demands explode beyond their bounds: as Žižek says, "politics is demand only before its revolutionary explosion: Lenin did not make demands, he wanted to cut throats!"⁵²

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 328.

⁴⁸ One might point, for example, to the perpetual lack of the necessary signifiers: what would count today as an empty signifier capable of constituting an anti-capitalist equivalential chain of demands? Additionally, none of our available floating signifiers (the pre-existing vague terms to which broad social *pathos* is already attached; examples include "freedom," "democracy," "justice") can ever be sufficiently insulated from reactionary reappropriation, as Lenin already saw apropos "freedom of criticism" in *What is to be Done?*.

⁴⁹ "Against the Populist Temptation," November 26, 2005.

⁵⁰ *On Populist Reason*, p. 234.

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 68-69.

⁵² "Against the Populist Temptation," November 26, 2005.

The opposition here reaches its starkest expression if we recall the second corollary of Marxist subjectivity: the proletariat acts in order to overthrow the capitalist social order, including its economic, political, intellectual, and cultural aspects. Laclau may be understood as reading the statement precisely backwards: revolutionary subjectivity seeks to overthrow the cultural (sexual, ethnic, etc.), intellectual, and political aspects of the social order; and, if possible, the economic aspects up to capitalism itself. In positing the universal as empty, as always receding, Laclau forces on us a wholly untenable position:

My claim is that if we accept such a gap as the ultimate horizon of political engagement, does it not leave us with a choice apropos of such an engagement: either we must blind ourselves to the necessary ultimate failure of our endeavor – regress to naivety, and let ourselves be caught up in the enthusiasm – or we must adopt a stance of cynical distance, participating in the game while being fully aware that the result will be disappointing?⁵³

By way of response, Laclau asserts that his populist particular is, as it were, persuasive enough to make up for the lack in the universal: “for a subject within a hegemonic configuration, that configuration is everything there is; it is not a moment within an endless approach towards an Ideal.”⁵⁴ What matters, rather, is the element of radical affective investment in the struggle:

The alternative Žižek presents – either naïve expectations or cynicism – collapses once a radical investment has been made in a partial object....[T]his object, albeit always partial, could involve radical change or global social transformation, but even when this is the case, the moment of radical investment will necessarily be present.⁵⁵

If the continued constitution of progressive populist hegemonic struggles is assured by the *pathos* of participants who do not know that their cause is not simply “what there is” but rather a tragically limited grasp toward an unattainable Ideal, then the unfortunate conclusion to Laclau’s response is that as few leftist political activists as possible should read his book. Furthermore, for anyone who is not as sanguine as Laclau about the automatic ability of populist chains of equivalence to acquire radical investment (satisfied, skeptical middle class apathy being what it is), some other basis for continued leftist struggle than populism may be desirable.

To Žižek’s claim that he has given up and accepted capitalism as “the only game in town,” Laclau responds that Žižek is not himself offering any concrete alternative.⁵⁶ Žižek concedes, but this, ultimately, is the goal of his entire intellectual endeavor: to prove that the Left is facing a fundamental choice: “either it accepts the predominant liberal democratic horizon (democracy, human rights and freedoms...), and engages in hegemonic battle *within* it, or it risks the opposite gesture of refusing its very terms,”⁵⁷ not in order to demand the merely materially impossible from within society, but to assert the logically impossible from an epistemic standpoint that will only become valid retroactively. Žižek is ultimately just as ambivalent about identifying concrete revolutionary possibilities as Marx was within his own political constellation. But my conclusion is that the problem of articulation is not a question of endorsing configured particularities, but of finding a new universal. Žižek’s defense of proletarian subjectivity sustains what is most essential about the Marxist position: not any specific logical countenance or tactical feature, but the discovery that, in the rarest and most

⁵³ Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, pp. 316-317.

⁵⁴ *On Populist Reason*, p. 234.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

⁵⁶ *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, p. 206.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 326.

abandoned corners of history, sometimes the “mean, wretched, vile, and vulgar” rise up from nothing and become everything.